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Chief/Political Section
American Embassy
Buenos Aires

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
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Dear Wayne:

On January 7 we had a rather fascinating 90 minutes with Philippe Labreveux of Le Monde. Bob Zimmermann, George Lister, Charles Runyon and I were present. Much of what Labreveux said is contained in the enclosed articles from Proceso, a Mexican magazine.

We were struck by what Labreveux said about the absence of Argentine organizations working on behalf of human rights. He stated that the only effective one is the Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos, a group dominated by Communists. Nonetheless, the League has lawyers who present habeas corpus petitions in an effort to get prisoners on record, and it has a network of informants. Labreveux stressed the importance of habeas corpus petitions, noting that the League is convinced that those murdered at Pilar would not have been executed if some kind of legal step had been taken on their behalf.

He described the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos as a timid group which occasionally makes declarations but does not take any sort of meaningful action on behalf of prisoners.

Labreveux stated that the Consejo Argentino por los Derechos Humanos is basically a two-man outfit: Roca and Garçon Maceda. He suggested that the Argentine Communists have little use for these two lawyers who are connected with terrorism, which the PCA opposes.

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Compared to Chile, things are very different in Argentina, he went on, because the Chilean Church hires lawyers and is far more progressive. In Argentina, even the Nuncio finds himself to the left of the bishops. He said that the Church is without bearings (desorientada) as are most Argentines. In Chile, there are committees grouping the relatives of prisoners. But in Argentina people are arrested for forming such groupings, as happened in Cordoba in mid-October, according to Labreveux.

He urged that the United States do all it can on behalf of human rights. He first called for a cutoff of military assistance but changed his mind when he recommended military-to-military contacts. (We pointed out that such contacts were unlikely without our modest military assistance.)

Labreveux feels that multilateral and organization approaches would be the most effective ways to influence the Argentines. For example, he suggested working in common with the European nations (the French and Italians); encouraging the Nuncio; encouraging the Scandinavians; taking more refugees (a very important gesture); fostering American Church to Argentine Church activities; union-to-union programs (so that the Argentine unions do not feel alone); and military-to-military dialogue.

We asked him to tell us about Cordoba. After briefly reviewing that city's role in the downfall of Ongania, Levingston and Lanusse, he described today's "reign of terror" under Menendez and his deputy Juan Bautista Saciain, the latter an unbalanced angel of vengeance. Even the Cardinal is afraid of speaking to Menendez, Labreveux stated. There is no question, he reported, that Menendez and Saciain control all government repression. Not even right-wing groups operate in Cordoba.

Terror also prevails in La Plata and Bahia Blanca. General Vilas is responsible for the arrests of Solari Irigoyen and Amaya. Alfonsin told Labreveux that Amaya was beaten for 15 straight days, that he had a scar right across the crest of his head. The Radicales are afraid to speak out, Labreveux claimed. Alfonsin made Labreveux promise not to publish anything. The military fear to release Solari because the latter could describe his torture.

Labreveux pitied the UCR which after 80 years of existence cannot even publish a daily newspaper. (Labreveux was unaware that General Vilas was retired. We told him.)

The Communists ("and I am not one") are so much better organized. They have suffered 10 dead, 50 abducted and 300 in jail. Yet the PCA does not wish to confront Videla, who is viewed as the lesser of other evils.

In an aside, Labreveux said Uruguay is worse than Argentina and for no reason. They have the same levels of repression but the most horrid forms of torture. He claimed that 2,000 Uruguayan Communists were arrested early in 1976.

Labreveux also felt that it would be better to have a strong president with defined ideas than to have Videla. I think Labreveux would argue that Videla's weakness should not be used to excuse Argentina as a consistent violater of human rights. Labreveux seems to doubt that things could get much worse. While there was little time to discuss economic questions, the French reporter suggested that Martinez de Hoz is guilty of social repression or as Argentine soccer fans say, he is a "Hood Robin" who robs from the poor to give to the rich.

Labreveux left us to go have lunch with John Salzberg. (George Lister's notes on this encounter are attached.) Labreveux told us that he might return in February to report on the hearings.

I am writing a letter rather than memcon in order to ask you a few questions about Labreveux's comments. We'd really appreciate your comments.

We are interested in the role of human rights groups within Argentina. Are the Church and Permanent Assembly ineffective? Is it true that the Communist Liga is the only group showing courage on the human rights front? Do we have contact with the Liga? Why are the Communists sticking their necks out? Are the bar associations totally intimidated? Are lawyers harassed for defending political prisoners? Was this Mario Yacub's crime? Is the state of siege simply a situation in which

he who is captured has no recourse and he who tries to help a prisoner finds himself condemned too? (By the way, ARA, INR and L are considering hiring a lawyer to comment on Argentine laws in order to give us a better idea of what might or might not fly in terms of human rights recommendations. I'll be sure to advise the Ambassador if the lawyer project goes much further, but it does reflect our interest in what is happening to the law, lawyers and judges.)

It would also be useful to have a better feel for what is happening in the provinces. What is the ambiente in, say Cordoba or Rosario? Could the Videla regime become unraveled in the provinces? Could Martinez de Hoz' policies spark another Cordobazo? I'll bet that you and your crew would like nothing better than to travel and stick your nose in provincial corners. I'm not suggesting travel, but when you (and I assume Econ too) learn tidbits about conditions in the interior, I hope you'll share them.

I also want to reiterate the interest with which the human rights roundups are received. They are very well written and full of nuggets. They are read avidly throughout our building. I guarantee you that Embassy Buenos Aires has a wide readership - which is a mixed blessing of course!

My best to you and POL.

Sincerely,

Fred

Fernando E. Rondon

Enclosures: As stated.

~~cc:~~ Ambassador Hill

Concurrence:ARA/ECA:RWZimmermann

bcc: ARA:CWBray
ARA:GLister
D/HA:WSpear
H:LPezzullo
INR:JBuchanan